

Shaped by God's Story

The Bible and Anabaptist Interpretation

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Western District Conference

My Plan



- Tonight I would like to commend certain distinctives of the Anabaptist approach to the Bible—and the reading of the Bible—as a serious proposal for the church, examining especially the Rule of Paul (1 Cor 14:26), the Rule of Christ (Matt 18:15-20), and Christocentrism (Heb 1:1-2; 1 Cor 3:11).
- Yesterday: the great *formational* potential of the Bible
- Tomorrow a.m.: seminar on Anabaptist approaches to Scripture
- Tomorrow aft.: seminar on the Bible and homosexuality in Anabaptist perspective
- Tomorrow eve: what Acts 10 and 15 tell us about using the Bible for ethics and listening to the Spirit

“Anabaptist”?



- *Anabaptist* is contested. Can we use it meaningfully?
- One approach: define what we like and call it “Anabaptist.”
- Results in a mythological Anabaptism with dubious connections to history or reality.
- In 1984 Institute of Mennonite Studies published *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley.
- Both Walter Klaassen and John H. Yoder cautious about under-appreciating subsequent centuries in understanding ourselves.

The 16th Century



- Cultural and Religious Context
- Religion defined and controlled by the hierarchy of the RCC
- Printing Press, Renaissance, rediscovery of the sources (“*ad fontes!*”)
- Biblicism
- *sola scriptura!* (for Protestants, including Anabaptists)
- Latter two “principles” essentially uncontested (exc. with RCC)

Seven Anabaptist Distinctives

Drawing from Stuart Murray and John H. Yoder



1. The Spirit and the Word (or the Two-Fold Word)
2. The Rule of Paul (congregational interpretation)
3. The Rule of Christ (the discipling role of the church)
4. Christocentrism (Christ as lens for Scripture)
5. The Priority of the New Testament (more authoritative than OT)
6. Perspicuity (the essential clarity of Scripture)
7. Epistemology of obedience (we learn by responding)

1600–1900 in Anabaptism



- Little scholarship on Anabaptism and the Bible these centuries (exc: C. Norman Kraus, Fritz Kuiper)
- In the 17th century, Anabaptists dropped the Apocrypha.
- In general, from the radicals to the quiet in the land
- Busy keeping heads down, escaping persecution, living in colonies (tho 17th- and 18th-c. Netherlands imp. exception).



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- Busy keeping heads down, escaping persecution, living in colonies (tho 17th- and 18th-c. Netherlands imp. exception).
- Migrations to Prussia (16th), France (17th), the U.S. (17th–20th), the Ukraine (18th–19th), Canada (19th–20th), Paraguay (20th), etc.
- Local cultures significant as Mennonites “gave and received”

1600–1900 in Anabaptism



- Broad commonalities (acc. to Kuiper)
 - Simple yet radical commitment to the Bible
 - Anabaptist view of the church
 - Restitutionist (attempt to restore NT church)
 - Separatist (to varying degrees)
 - Centrality of Christ
 - Commitment to nonconformity
 - Peace theology and commitment

1900s



- 20th c.: huge changes between 1900 and 2000.
 1. Century of significant migration and cultural adjustment
 2. Dawning impact of the 17th-c. Enlightenment and rationalism
 3. In the U.S., modernist-fundamentalist debate deeply influential
 4. In the U.S., Civilian Public Service changed the face of Mennonitism

1900s



5. The church has become “professionalized.”
6. The church has become educated. (In 1900 no American Mennonite had a doctoral degree, even teachers and principals of Mennonite colleges.)
7. The “typical” Mennonite went from being a white North American male to being a black African female.

Why Revisit the 16th Century?



- Influenced by much since. *Formed* more by later c. than 16th.
- What are we doing? A requisite nod to our ancestors? No.
- A remythologizing of the past to direct our future? No.
- Wisdom in our heritage that we would do best not to lose.

Why Revisit the 16th Century?



- (Also some mistakes to repudiate, more tomorrow morning.)
- Of the seven approaches to the Bible that characterize 16th-c. Anabaptism, I would like to focus on three this evening:
 - The Rule of Paul (congregational interpretation)
 - The Rule of Christ (God's wisdom for community discipling)
 - Christocentrism (Christ as *the* Word of God, self-revelation)

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



“²⁶When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (1 Cor. 14).

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- Not an innovation of the Anabaptists.
- “All across the beginning Protestant movement, we can observe the same theologically motivated conviction about the process whereby God’s will is made known. Independently in all the early Protestant movements, this conviction was understood to be prefigured in and mandated specifically by 1 Corinthians 14. Consensus arises uncoerced out of open conversation. There is no voting in which a majority overruns a minority and no decision of a leader by virtue of his office. The only structure this process needs is the moderating that keeps it orderly and the recording of the conclusions reached” (Yoder, *Body Politics*, p. 67).

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- An exciting empowerment of local bodies of Christians gathered for worship! We don’t have to have a priest or a scholar or a doctor of the church present to discern God’s will!
- Zwingli and other Reformers began to back off in their commitment.
- Everyone contributes to worship, to the life of the congregation.

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- Responsibility of the entire congregation to weigh what is said.
- The Anabaptists were not willing to “give over” the interpretation of Scripture to independent spiritualists. They were unwilling to accept without testing, a claim like, “God told me ... or God showed me ...”
- Such claims needed to be tested by the worshiping congregation as a whole.

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- The Bible is best read and interpreted in the congregation—not in the private study carrel and not even in theological seminaries.
- In the Mennonite tradition, the biblical seminary prepares men and women to lead the people of God without assuming the interpretive authority that belongs to the congregation as a whole.

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- Biblical scholars have a special kind of giftedness that can and should be made available to the congregation, but the task of determining God's will is still a practical, congregational task, not primarily a seminary task.
- The Anabaptists were unwilling to submit to the official interpretations of the mother church. *They were free to read and study the Bible . . . together!*

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- Was and is one of the most significant characteristics of Anabaptist hermeneutics.
- Downsides
 1. Sometimes represents a “pooling of ignorance.”
 2. Can feed division.
 3. It can shield the individual congregation from the wisdom of the larger church.
 4. It is hard work.

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



- It remains important today for several reasons.
 1. Underscores importance of corporate seeking after God's will.
 2. It checks the sometimes wild imagination of the individual Christian and submits those judgments to the collective wisdom of the church.

The Rule of Paul

Congregational Hermeneutics



3. It protects the congregation from authoritative pronouncements of a larger church body. It is essentially a *congregational* responsibility to interpret the Bible.
4. It keeps front and center the purpose of biblical interpretation: to make ourselves more fully available to God in discipleship.

The Rule of Christ (Mt. 18:15-20)



If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Are We Talking about Church Discipline?!



- Whatever else characterizes Mennonite history, it is full of stories about church discipline going poorly!
- Matt 18 at its best is not about “church discipline” or “correction”—and certainly not about keeping the church “pure,” whatever that means. At its best, Matt 18 is about
 - Being there for each other
 - Giving and receiving counsel
 - Seeking the other’s wellbeing above all else
 - Humbly living out the trust we have in each other

The Rule of Christ (Mt. 18:15-20)



- The principle:
 - The promise of the Spirit's blessing is for practical discernment for discipleship, not for timeless abstract truth.
 - The community's interpretation is binding for that time and place.
- Other considerations:
 - Beware penchant for decisions by the broader church?
 - Not discussed by Murray: is it really a hermeneutical principle?

Christocentrism



- *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ... (Heb. 1:1-2).*
- *For no other foundation can be laid, than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11).*

Christocentrism



- The authority of the Bible lies in its unique witness to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate Word of God, the pinnacle of God’s self-revelation.
- Borg: The Bible is like a finger pointing to the moon (Christ): don’t get too obsessed with the finger itself (“bibliolatry”).
- The revelation of God in Christ is the pinnacle of divine revelation.

Christocentrism



- All other revelation—biblical or otherwise—must be understood in light of Christ.
- Two primary aspects:
 - 1. How do the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as the pinnacle of God’s self-revelation inform our reading of this text? What would Jesus say? What would Jesus do?
 - 2. How does our primary commitment to follow Christ in discipleship inform our reading of this text? How does this text inform or enable our discipleship?

Summary



- Rule of Paul: biblical interpretation is a congregational responsibility.
- Rule of Christ: Christ promises his presence and blessing specifically for the hard work of giving and receiving counsel in a discipling community.
- Christocentrism: keep our focus on Christ, the center and pinnacle (“cornerstone”) of our faith, even more important than the Bible that witnesses to him.
- May God bless our reading, our discernment, our work as congregations, and our commitment to follow Christ!

Questions for Table Discussion



Making the Theoretical Concrete

How (1) **useful** and (2) **realistic** are these three principles of biblical interpretation for your local congregation or for Western District as a whole?

1. The Rule of Paul (congregational interpretation)
2. The Rule of Christ (discipling one another)
3. Christocentrism (reading through the lens of God’s self-revelation in Jesus, reading in order to follow Christ more fully)

What next steps would it take to embody these principles?